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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the impact of overage middle school students on middle schools. Four groups of educators were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the impact of overage middle school students. Questionnaires were returned by 183 teachers, 44 counselors, 24 principals, and 7 central office staff members, all of whom had substantial experience in middle schools. Teachers reported that overage students have a negative impact on social interactions, classroom management, instruction, and other students. Teachers also perceived that they needed assistance to provide effective instruction for these students. Counselors reported negative impacts on social interactions and on younger students. Principals noted impacts on discipline, test scores, student attitudes, and summer school programs. Central office administrators reported negative effects on budgeting, instruction, test scores, student attitudes, peer relations, school climate, discipline, programs, staffing, and summer school. (Contains two tables and three bar charts.) (SLD)

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# Impact of Overage Middle School Students

## Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium

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Research Brief # 37

MERC

October 1998

# Impact of Overage Middle School Students

## INTRODUCTION

A continuing issue in school reform efforts is the need to decrease dropout rates for students. Many dropouts are at-risk students who have failing grades, inadequate academic skills, and low levels of literacy. These students are often retained in grade and become overage.

While students may actually drop out in high school, behaviors that lead to dropping out begin to occur in middle school, or even earlier in the school experience. Many middle school students who are retained in grade become overage students who eventually drop out. Because of new academic standards and testing procedures, these students can remain in middle school long after their peers have gone on to high school. This situation has the potential for having a negative impact on the school district, the school, and most importantly, the students. These students most often suffer a decrease in self-esteem, a decrease in attachment to school, and an increase in behavioral problems.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this research brief is to summarize the findings of a study of the impact of overage middle school students on middle schools. The intent of the study was to collect quantitative and qualitative data to determine (1) the extent of the problem of overage middle school students; (2) the impact that the problem had on schools, and classrooms; (3) what schools are doing about the problem; and (4) effective strategies for all middle schools. For this study, overage student is defined as a student who is at least two years older than they would have been had he/she entered first grade at the legally required minimum age.

## METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted by using a survey research design which yielded both quantitative and qualitative data. Four groups of educators were surveyed in order to determine their perceptions of the impact of overage middle school students on schools: middle school teachers, principals, counselors, and central office administrators. Members of each group received a questionnaire with Likert-type items and items with open-ended responses. The questionnaire also elicited demographic data.

- **Participants**

  A purposeful, nonprobability sample was selected from seven school districts in central Virginia representing urban, suburban, and rural localities. The seven districts varied in size and population and contained from one to eleven middle schools. All of the middle schools in each district were invited to participate in the study, which yielded a possible total of 33 schools.

  Each school was asked to distribute questionnaires to 12 selected teachers. The criteria for selection were that the teachers must have had at least two years of teaching experience, must have taught overage students, and must teach in grades 6, 7, or 8. In addition, three should be mathematics teachers, three should be English teachers, three should be science teachers, and three should be social studies teachers. Each school was also asked to distribute questionnaires to all counselors in the school and to the principal. In addition, a questionnaire was sent to each central office for a response from an upper-level administrator.

  Questionnaires were completed and returned by 183 teachers, 44 counselors, 24 principals, and 7 central office staff for a total of 259 responses. The demographic data indicated that all participants had substantial experience working in middle schools.

- **Instruments**

  Four separate survey questionnaires were developed. Each contained one common set of questions that were used to compare the responses of the four groups of participants. The rest of the questions on the forms related specifically to the respondents' position. All of the forms used a multiple-choice format for data about demographics, a Likert-type scale for data about perceptions of issues and problems, and an open-ended question format for suggestions about solutions.



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- **Procedures**

  The questionnaires were sent to all of the middle schools and to the central offices in the seven MERC school districts. An accompanying letter asked the administrators to appoint an aide to distribute and collect the questionnaires. Along with the forms, individual envelopes were sent to the participants in which they could seal their completed surveys to ensure confidentiality. The participants then returned their envelopes to the distributor who placed them in a larger envelope for forwarding.

- **Data Analysis**

  The quantitative data were analyzed with frequencies for the variables of interest and summed percentages of "Agree/Strongly Agree" and "Strong/Moderate Impact" for all variables represented.

  The qualitative data were analyzed by using a concept formation procedure. The responses for each open-ended question were put into categories based on common attributes. This procedure was followed on all participant's answers.

## FINDINGS

- **Quantitative Results**

  Teachers reported that the overage students had a negative impact in the classroom on social interactions, classroom management, instruction, and non-overage students. The teachers also perceived that they needed assistance in providing effective instruction, and that there was a need for specialized staffing and specialized programs for overage students.

  Counselors reported that overage students had a negative impact on social interactions and on non-overage students. The counselors believed that they were able to provide services to meet the needs of overage students but also indicated that they needed assistance in order to be more effective.

  Principals reported that overage middle school students have a moderate/strong/negative impact on discipline, test scores, student attitudes, and summer school.

  Central office administrators reported that overage middle school students have a moderate/strong negative impact on a number of areas: budgeting, instruction, test scores, student attitudes, peer relations, school climate, discipline, programs, staffing, and summer school.

- **Qualitative Results**

  Qualitative results, from the open-ended items, are reported according to position. Teachers identified two major types of effective methods for meeting the needs of overage middle school students in their classroom. These were instructional strategies and techniques, and interpersonal relationships. Instructional strategies and techniques included cooperative learning groups, differentiated levels of instruction, and independent assignments. Strategies for improving interpersonal relationships included using praise/encouragement/rewards to foster pride, self-esteem, and motivation. Teachers also suggested more counseling, early intervention or retention in the elementary school, special at-risk or alternative programs, and special schools for overage students.

  Additional suggestions were to establish a "success academy" or charter schools for overage students. Counselors also identified two types of strategies or programs: student contracts and student/parent/teacher conferences. Literacy and job skills programs were also identified, as were alternative schools and alternative programs for overage students in the school. The strategies and programs need to build self-esteem, increase parental involvement, and enhance basic life skills such as parenting and budgeting. A smaller student/counselor ratio would help counselors take the time needed for dealing with overage students.

  Principals suggested that flexible grade placement with age-appropriate classmates, promotions at semester breaks, "care" and "success" academics, smaller classes, lower teacher/student ratios, instruction for job placement, technical training options, and career planning would be helpful. Principals also mentioned alternative schools and summer school with no, or minimal tuition. They are concerned that new statewide competency exams will increase the drop out rate of overage students. It was suggested that middle level classes could be taught in high school to accommodate overage students who are promoted but are still lacking in basis skills.

  Central office administrators described the nature of the problem as primarily disciplinary and poor

academic performance. They cited the need for more staffing to allow lower student/teacher ratios. They emphasized the inordinate costs for the limited number of students impacted. Suggested programs included alternative schools, individualized student plans similar to IEPs, peer assistance, coaching, counseling, mentor/shadow programs, and the use of the "best" teachers for these students. Like principals, they are concerned that the new state competency exams will increase the number of overage students. Major emphasis needs to be placed in the first three years of schooling.

- **Summary of Findings Related to Research Questions**

*How extensive is the problem of overage students in MERC middle schools?* *(See Bar Chart 1)*

The majority of participants in this study reported that overage students have a negative impact on their schools and school districts. In response to the statement "overage students have a negative impact on my school," 42% of teachers and 72% of counselors agreed or strongly agreed. In response to the question about "what impact overage middle school students have on your school/school district, "60% of principals and 100% of central office administrators answered strong or moderate impact. These responses indicate that the problem of overage students in MERC middle schools is fairly extensive.

*What impact does the problem of overage students have on schools and classrooms?* *(See Table 2)*

All four groups of participants were asked to respond to the same question about the extent of the negative impact that overage students have on schools. The majority (50% or more) of teachers, counselors, principals, and central office administrators were in agreement that there was a strong/moderate impact in the following areas: instruction, test scores, student attitudes, peer relations, school climate, classroom discipline, and summer school. There was a lack of agreement about the impact on the following areas: Budgeting, programs, and staffing. There was unanimous agreement that overage students had no/little impact on extra curricular activities.

These responses indicate that the problem of overage students has a negative impact on many of the critical areas in the effective operation of schools and classrooms. In addition, principals and central office administrators perceive that the issue of overage

**Bar Chart 1**

**Having overage students has a negative impact on my school**

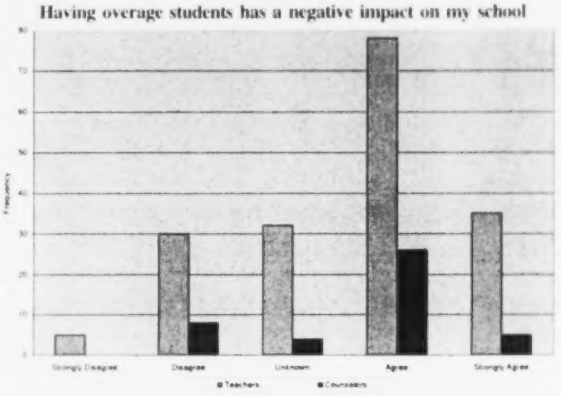



**Table 2**

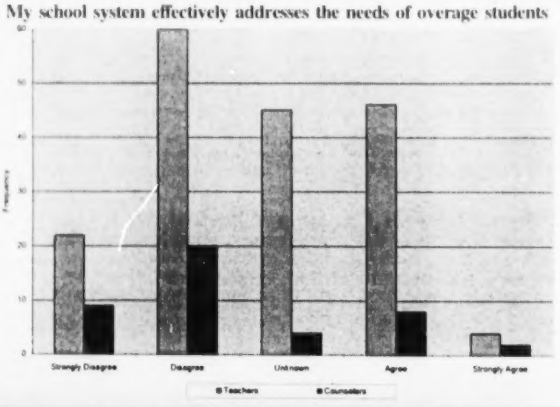
**To what extent do overage middle school students negatively impact your school in the following areas?**

**Percentage of Strong/Moderate Impact**

| | Teachers | Counselors | Principals | Central Office |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Budgeting | 42.6 | 29.4 | 36.4 | 75 |
| Instruction | 82.3 | 65.8 | 54.2 | 87.5 |
| Test Scores | 87.1 | 77.1 | 66.7 | 85.8 |
| Student Attitudes | 84.7 | 73.7 | 62.5 | 87.5 |
| Peer Relations | 85.6 | 79 | 58.3 | 100 |
| School Climate | 83.8 | 62.1 | 58.4 | 75 |
| Discipline | 91.1 | 68.4 | 75 | 100 |
| Programs | 54.1 | 39.3 | 41.6 | 85.7 |
| Staffing | 36.4 | 50 | 43.4 | 75 |
| Summer School | 80.5 | 72.4 | 65 | 87.5 |
| Extra Curricular | 34.5 | 40 | 25 | 25 |

**Bar Chart 3**

**My school system effectively addresses the needs of overage students**



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middle school students will have a negative impact on the results of the new "Standards of Learning" testing and that the SOL testing will have a negative impact on the future of the students.

*What are schools doing about the problem?*
*(See Bar Chart 3)*

Teachers, counselors, principals, and central office administrators report that there are a number of strategies and programs currently in use. These include tutoring, individual and group counseling, placement in alternative schools, and several others. However, only 33% of teachers and 23.3% of counselors agree/strongly agree that their school systems effectively address the needs of overage students. Likewise, only 33% of teachers and 36% of counselors agree/strongly agree that their middle schools effectively address the needs of overage students. Further, principals offered suggestions for a number of programs they would try if resources were not limited. In addition, central office administrators report that their school districts mainly use informal guidelines regarding overage students.

These responses indicate that schools have instituted a number of strategies and programs for addressing the issue of overage students. Yet, many participants perceive that schools and school systems are still not doing enough. Some of the responses imply that the use of strategies and programs are inconsistent from teacher-to-teacher and from school-to-school, and could perhaps be improved by more resources, formal guidelines and policies, and system-wide organization and planning.

*What are some effective strategies that may be helpful to all middle schools?*

Teachers, counselors, principals, and central office administrators offer several suggestions about strategies that may be helpful to all middle schools dealing with the problem of overage students. These include more parental involvement, vocational/technical programs, teacher training, special schedules for promotion, summer school offerings, and alternative schools. All groups of respondents also suggested that the problem needs to be first addressed at the elementary level.

In addition, there are strategies that may be derived from the literature review. Middle schools could consider the information presented about resilient at-risk middle school students and about alternatives to retention. The literature also describes several existing programs which use effective strategies. Middle schools could select the strategies that best meet the needs of their students.

## Implications

The results suggest that schools and school districts should continue to seek means for improving the chances for success of at-risk students and for reducing the number of overage students. Educators also need to reduce the number of retentions, since several studies show that grade retention had negative effects, especially when it causes students to be overage. Other means, instead of retention, need to be developed to help students master grade level tasks. The results also suggest that elementary school practices need to be examined to ensure that these schools are adequately teaching students to read and that they are also using alternatives to retention. In order to effectively meet the needs of overage children on all levels, school personnel need additional training and staff development opportunities.

Several sensible, practical suggestions for enhancing instructional practices were made by teachers, counselors, principals, and central office administrators that could be included as staff development opportunities. Further, the results suggest that school, city, county, and state policies should be influenced to reflect an understanding of the issues regarding overage students. This could be accomplished by implementing programs for students, providing adequate resources and funding, and formulating practices that address the dropout problem. Finally, participants in the study expressed concern for a willingness to improve the problems regarding overage students. Hence, there appear to be optimistic prospects for the resolution of these problems and for ensuring that overage students can become successful, and fully functioning members of our society.

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